

Changing Organizational Culture to Achieve Excellence in Research

Wes Shera

This article describes the research capacity building efforts of the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto over the past 12 years. It identifies the role of strategic planning, the process of change, and the key practices, in terms of personnel, resources, research center development, and strategic community partnerships, which were used to enhance research capacity and productivity. Major lessons learned include the importance of continuity in leadership commitment, the need to use a strategic planning process to establish and implement achievable targets, the pivotal utility of research centers to act as catalysts and supporters of faculty research, the critical process of faculty development and recruitment, the importance of integrating the advancement agenda with institutional research objectives, and the need to systematically develop community research partnerships.

KEY WORDS: *capacity building; evidence-based practice; organizational culture; research productivity; schools of social work*

Over the past 20 years, we have witnessed an increasingly significant shift in our focus on the importance of research in the discipline of social work. Holosko (2006) argued that North American social work has moved through an evolution from case wisdom to empirical practice and then to evidence-based practice, the current focus of many of our efforts. He further argued that two major forces have led this movement: a cadre of social work educators who have provided continuing leadership, and a range of organizations and institutions that have supported an increased focus on research, including professional associations, educational and accrediting institutions, and human services organizations (Holosko, 2006). Of particular note is the role of funding organizations such as the National Institute of Mental Health, the John A. Hartford Foundation, the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research in the United States (Zlotnik, Biegel, & Solt, 2002), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and the Canadian Institutes for Health Research in Canada. These institutional investments have been critical in the development of research infrastructure and productivity in schools of social work.

Although the social work literature has addressed different aspects of capacity building in schools of social work (Leukefeld & Ries, 1993; Proctor,

1996; Wodarski, 1991, 1995; Zlotnik et al., 2002), to date there does not appear to be a comprehensive framework for understanding capacity building from a more holistic organizational perspective. Academically based schools of nursing also have been recently involved in research capacity building and some helpful reviews are available (Cooke & Green, 2000; Segrott, McIvor, & Green, 2005). These reviews conclude that an overall strategic approach, clearly communicated and accompanied by effective leadership is critical.

The Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto has, historically, been a leader in social work education and research and viewed the need to enhance its research capacity as essential to maintaining and improving its leadership role. This objective is ultimately linked with the promotion of evidence-based practice. Growing pressure at the university level to increase research productivity has also served to motivate the initiatives described in this article.

COMPONENTS OF CAPACITY BUILDING

Strategic Planning

The Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto was established in 1914 as the first program of social work education in Canada. The program was initially accredited by the American Association of Schools of Social Work/Council on Social

Work Education and, since 1978, by the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW). Its mission statement puts emphasis on interdisciplinary knowledge building and excellence in the development and testing of new knowledge to have an impact on social policy and social work practice (Faculty of Social Work, 1999a). The University of Toronto views itself as one of the most research-intensive universities in Canada. In the late 1980s, the university hired a new dean for the Faculty of Social Work with a clear expectation that the research productivity be increased. A 1993 decanal report identified the top two priorities for the Faculty of Social Work: (1) expansion of faculty research and scholarship activities so that high-quality and productive research activities are the norm across faculty and (2) enhancement of research funding.

In 1994, the Provost's Office issued a white paper to facilitate the development of five-year strategic plans by each of the faculties. A major cornerstone of the white paper was to push the University of Toronto to be one of the best public research-intensive universities in North America. The Faculty of Social Work's major priorities related to research in their academic plan for the 1995 to 2000 period included support for conducting and disseminating high-quality scholarship and research, achieving congruence between scholarship and research and teaching of faculty members, and fostering interdisciplinary links in education programs and research (Faculty of Social Work, 1999b).

Implementation of this plan required action at all levels of the Faculty of Social Work, including the dean, faculty members, students, curriculum, research centers, fundraising, and the development of university and community partnerships. Most of what was identified in the 1995 plan was implemented during the subsequent seven-year decanal term (1995–2002). The decanal leadership since 2002 has continued to give very high priority to research including the recent development of a Research Institute for Evidence-Based Social Work (Regehr, Stern, & Shlonsky, 2007) and research collaborations with such groups as the St. Louis Group and the Campbell Collaboration (<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org>).

Research Infrastructure

In 1995 the Faculty of Social Work established the Centre of Applied Social Research (CASR) as the major catalyst and incubator for research. CASR's

mandate is to conduct applied social research related to the effectiveness of social work practice interventions, programs, social policies, and resource allocation. CASR provides an organizational infrastructure to link faculty scholarship with community research needs and graduate student research interests (Faculty of Social Work, 1999a).

CASR provides concrete assistance for faculty members in terms of keeping them informed about research funding opportunities, assisting with the completion of grant applications and ethics clearance, networking with colleagues across the university, hiring research assistants, and managing the financial aspects of grants. As noted by Wodarski (1995) and Leukefeld and Ries (1993), these activities can play a significant role in improving the research productivity of schools of social work.

The Faculty of Social Work's community research partnerships were led by CASR through an annual planning process. To be effective, we felt that it was important to focus on one major community research partner at a time (Nyden, Figert, Shibley, & Burrows, 1997). A wide range of capacity building work was done with social work practitioners in the organizations we worked with. In all cases, much of the work, which was often implemented by a course-released faculty member and core social work staff of the partner agency, focused on various stages and types of capacity building such as the following: shadowing of workers to identify good practice evaluation questions, having a journal review club to discuss recent research articles focused on important areas of practice, seeking support from within the organization to be able to devote some time and energy to research, holding workshops on research design and statistics, writing grant proposals, implementing research projects, and writing articles for peer-reviewed journals. A critical task was to assess the degree to which each setting was ready to evaluate its current practice, implement evidence-based practice, and develop best practice protocols (Stout & Hayes, 2005).

A number of professional colleagues involved in these partnerships had taken our postmaster's diploma in social work research that had been designed to build the competence of practicing social workers. A key insight, which emerged from this process of collaborative work with community agencies, was that each partnership was unique. The baseline competencies, the internal organizational support, and the vision of what was needed and

the motivation to engage in a more evidence-based practice were different in each of the organizations. The costs of these initiatives were shared between the partners and the developments undertaken with these community partners have led to long-lasting research collaborations. Numerous other research collaborations with multiethnic organizations were undertaken through the leadership of our Anti-Racism, Multiculturalism and Native Issues Centre (George, Shera, & Tsang, 1998).

Research Chairs

Although CASR was seen as the engine of change, it was also critical to use our advancement campaign to help fund endowed research chairs to facilitate research leadership in focused areas of social work practice. Our campaign, which has now raised more than \$30 million dollars for the Faculty of Social Work, includes a number of endowed chairs in such areas as child and family, gerontological social work, housing, social work, multiculturalism, and applied social work research. One of our chairs (social justice, equity and diversity) was funded by the Canada Research Chairs Program through SSHRC. This allocation was made on the basis of our performance in SSHRC research competitions.

The key factors leading to the success of our campaign included the development of our own advancement office, the use of key alumni to network with lead donors, the identification of an experienced corporate-connected campaign chair and committee to lead the campaign, the use of private sector gifts to leverage additional government funding, the connection with key donors in the Chinese community, and aggressively seeking out creative options for funding.

Research Centers

Over the past 12 years, the Faculty of Social Work has been very involved in creating its own specialized research centers, participating in the development of other research centers on campus, and participating in national and international research centers and networks. One of the first interdisciplinary research centers that the Faculty of Social Work helped to develop was the Centre for Excellence in Research on Immigration and Settlement (CERIS). CERIS, a tri-university collaboration, has been extremely successful over the past 10 years and is now part of an international research network on immigration and settlement studies.

The Faculty of Social Work's first specialization-focused center was the Joint Centre for Research in Gerontological Social Work with the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care. This center is a unique partnership with one of North America's leading geriatric facilities. The center has been able to obtain several research grants focused, for example, on the evaluation of an Internet-based video conferencing e-health intervention for caregivers of family members with long-term disabilities and degenerative diseases and on the development of a tool for assessing the personal resources and vulnerabilities of family caregivers.

A major donation from Bell Canada to create the Bell Canada Child Welfare Unit was used to leverage a multimillion dollar grant from the Public Health Agency of Canada to establish the Centre for Excellence in Child Welfare. This has subsequently developed into a national network of research centers focusing on child welfare. The Faculty of Social Work is also a pivotal collaborator in the National Initiative for the Care of the Elderly and the initiative on Social Assistance in the New Economy.

Our most recent center is the Institute for Evidence-Based Social Work (Regehr et al., 2007), which is forging bridges between social work research and the communities the Faculty of Social Work serves. The guiding vision of evidence-based social work used by the institute is inclusive, with an appreciation of alternative means of arriving at best practice information. Client voice in research is also emphasized (Rapp, Shera, & Kisthardt, 1993).

The institute is undertaking initiatives that build on the research and practice strengths of faculty members and the areas of specialization that provide the framework for the delivery of its educational programs. These initiatives use a variety of strategies, including research centers, collaborative research partnerships, systematic reviews, and specific strategies for dissemination (Regehr et al., 2007). Two of the first projects of the institute include the Welfare of Children Initiative and the Competency for Professional Practice Initiative, which is designed to identify best practices in educating social work students and professionals, disseminate best practice information, and collaborate with educational researchers in allied professions.

Faculty

Faculty play a pivotal role in ensuring the success of an organizational change effort and can both

impede and facilitate change. If the discussions and consultations with faculty regarding these changes have been sufficiently inclusive, leaders can usually count on the majority supporting the new direction. This should not, however, blind leaders to being aware of the politics of change, which Proehl (2001) described as the human factors faced in implementing change. A broad-based management team and well-organized retreats designed to give voice to alternative views were excellent tools to reach a reasonably high level of consensus on important issues in the Faculty of Social Work.

A critical component of change is to provide appropriate professional development, speaker series, and workshops. These and other opportunities were provided to assist with faculty development. Topics included, for example, advanced techniques in statistical analysis, new developments in software for qualitative analysis, tips for writing successful grant applications, and new federal government funding opportunities (Leukefeld & Ries, 1993). New faculty hired during this period of change had extensive training in research and a long-term commitment to research and scholarship as a primary focus of their academic career. New faculty were provided with one course release per year until tenure and a senior faculty mentor to ensure the development of a robust program of research. After much debate, the overall teaching course load for all faculty was reduced from five to four graduate courses per academic year. Travel stipends were made available for faculty presenting refereed papers at national and international conferences. These incentives acted as a signal that research excellence was expected and that the Faculty of Social Work was making a concrete contribution to this objective through the reduction of course load (Proctor, 1996).

Most of the faculty increased their productivity in research and scholarship, and the submission and success rates for external grants increased significantly. A few faculty were, however, not interested in moving in this direction. In these situations, we were able to work with individuals to consider early retirement or job alternatives.

Curriculum

The quality of the doctoral program is a useful indicator of the overall strength and reputation of a department or school. It is also a critical component in the overall research productivity of the organization. Several initiatives were undertaken to

improve the program, including the development of an expanded research methods course, the inclusion of a multimethod module, the implementation of an interim advising system and student advisory committee, the development of guidelines to assess the quality of doctoral dissertations (Shera, 2001a, 2001b), and increased involvement with the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education. We were also able to create a set of doctoral research fellowships sponsored by the Royal Bank of Canada. Faculty members apply for these \$10,000 fellowships to do small studies or pilot research work in important areas of scholarship. The student receives half of the fellowship as a grant and the other half is earned by being a mentored research assistant on a project. A very recent development has been the concept of Communities of Scholarship, which are networks of faculty members, students, and agency practitioners interested in particular areas of scholarship. The intent is to be more purposive in mapping out faculty, student, and community partners' scholarly interests so that communities of scholarship can be nurtured.

The master's program has also undergone significant changes over the past 12 years. CASSW has conducted two reviews over the period, and we have made major curriculum changes. In all of these changes, the importance of research has increased significantly. Evidence-based practice is now infused throughout the curriculum, and a master's thesis option has been made available (Howard, McMillen, & Pollio, 2003; Rubin & Parrish, 2007).

It is also important to note the changes that have taken place in our practicum model. In our 1999 strategic plan, we laid out an ambitious plan to develop a teaching center model, which was designed to establish 10 centers for practice teaching and practice evaluation research. These centers provide students with opportunities to learn and participate in studies of practice outcomes, facilitate the intensive integration of a theory-practice-research focus in student practicums, and link faculty and agency research interests. This teaching center model facilitates the application of class-based material on evidence-based practice in the field and promotes the development of practice evaluation projects.

EVIDENCE TO DOCUMENT THE SUCCESS OF THE CHANGE EFFORT

Although a full documentation of the outcomes of our capacity building efforts is beyond the scope

of this article, some critical snapshots are provided. In 1999, a very extensive self-study was completed as the first step in the Raising Our Sights strategic planning process. That review highlighted accomplishments over the 1995 to 1999 period. As part of that review we also conducted a survey of the top 10 schools of social work in the United States to obtain data for comparative benchmarking. In some areas, such as fundraising, we ranked at the very top, and in other areas, such as enrollment, yield rates, research and scholarly productivity, and graduation rates, we compared favorably with the top 10 schools (Faculty of Social Work, 1999a). We were also required to conduct an external review by two discipline experts. This report (Rowe & Videka-Sherman, 1999) assessed the program relative to the best of its kind in North America. Their assessment stated, with respect to research-related activities, that the Faculty of Social Work ranks among the best in the following areas: quality, commitment, and research productivity of its faculty; quality of its doctoral program; the presence of CASR as a vehicle to bring research support resources to faculty; and the presence of research and practice partnerships with other disciplines and with human services agencies in the greater Toronto area (Rowe & Videka-Sherman, 1999).

In 2001, we completed an updated scholarly productivity analysis. This analysis included an actual count of publications from curriculum vitas and a citation analysis through the use of the Social Sciences Citation Index. These data were then compared with the findings of published productivity studies, in particular the Decade Publication Project. The results revealed that the overall per faculty annual productivity had increased from 5.25 products in 1995 to 6.88 in 2000. Our comparative analysis indicated that our scholarly productivity ranked fourth against the top U.S. schools of social work. The citation analysis also revealed that over a 10-year period (1990 to 2000) our academic work was having an increasingly greater impact on the social science knowledge base (Sera, 2001a).

In terms of research performance, CASR monitors all research activity in the Faculty of Social Work and provides regular reports. The 2001 to 2002 and the 2004 to 2005 reports provide a longitudinal analysis of research performance over the period 1995 to 2005. These reports (Daciuk, McDonell, & Regehr, 2001; Daciuk & Regehr, 2005) identified a steady increase in research funding from \$365,000 in

1995/1996 to \$3.6 million in 2004/2005. It is also important to note that faculty members are increasingly involved in collaborative research activities in which the funding is administered by another academic department or institution. This interdisciplinary research activity grew from \$540,000 in 1995/1996 to \$2.4 million in 2004/2005.

LESSONS LEARNED

Over a 12-year period, dramatic changes at the Faculty of Social Work have led to a significant increase in research productivity, national and international leadership, and much more visibility in the social work education community. In reflecting on some of the lessons learned in this experience, the following major insights emerge:

- Building an organization's capacity to increase research productivity takes time, requires continuity of leadership commitment, and must be comprehensive if it is to have an impact on organizational culture.
- When and where possible, use external forces to create a sense of urgency and increase motivation to change by providing support and incentives, hiring new faculty who are supportive of the mission, and assisting those who are not to find acceptable alternatives.
- Establish a research office or center that provides faculty support and acts as an incubator of new research projects and research partnerships with the practice community. Strive to create additional research centers and research chairs to act as catalysts in specific areas of practice.
- Create research partnerships with other faculties, universities, and community service organizations, but do so developmentally, not taking on too much at one time. When creating research partnerships with community agencies, avoid a cookie-cutter approach; custom tailor the agreement and focus on the unique strengths and areas for development that are required by using a wide range of context-appropriate strategies.
- Integrate the advancement agenda with the overall strategy for building capacity and productivity in research. Create partnerships with the private sector to leverage additional funds to support chairs, research centers, and research projects.

- Implement a systematic approach to tracking implementation and have management team members take responsibility for meeting delegated objectives. Develop your own performance indicator approach to provide data in seeking additional support and responding to larger institutional accountability requirements.

To develop a vision-driven, clearly communicated strategic plan and to have effective leadership in place are key ingredients in building research capacity. Creating a coalition for change requires consultation and collaboration with faculty members, students, and community partners. An inclusive process that allows participants to assess the current situation and develop a feasible plan for change has a greater chance of success. If capacity building in research is to be robust, the depth and scope of change must shift organizational culture. **SWR**

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Wes Shera, PhD, is professor and dean emeritus, Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, 246 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1A1; e-mail: wes.shera@utoronto.ca.

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